

Knowing Disability History: Not a Small Task

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A review with commentary on *A Little History Worth Knowing*, narrated by Ron Lofton, 1998, Irene M. Ward & Associates (22 minutes, 41 seconds).

The title for this film is appropriately modest; how much can you do in less than half an hour? On the other hand, the subject is vast, it covers a long period, and since so many topics are touched upon, there is no chance of developing any one issue in depth.

In the course of a quick overview, widely accepted but superficial ideas and myths are repeated and passed along as historical facts. Thus, we hear about widespread infanticide in ancient Greece, and we learn that such practices were ended when the Romans became Christians. The Christian framework, we are told, led to the notion that disability and evil are connected. We hear about the Age of Reason and Science, how medical doctors meant to cure disability, but then they got carried away with their scientific diagnosing and labeling and ended up embracing eugenics as a solution to the disability problem.

One danger associated with covering so many topics and such long periods in a few minutes, is that events blend and historical complexity and accuracy is lost. In this film, we go so fast from the Age of Science and Reason, to medical advances, to eugenics, to Hitler's extermination camps, that it is impossible to adequately examine the historical developments the producers portrayed. Some aspects of this film are promising. The fact that the history of people with psychiatric disabilities has been well integrated into the story line adds to the value of this video production.

This film also demonstrates the increasing awareness and desire within the disability community to learn more about our history. As a community we are discovering that we need to be visible in the accounts of the past, not hidden away, ignored, or only visible through negative stereotypes. Paul Longmore has been saying this for many years. Increasingly, the disability community is asking for disability scholarship in general, and disability history in particular; we recognize the need for our experiences and perspectives to gain sustained attention and legitimization within the academy.

This film describes the recent history of the disability movement with flair, and the list of disability resources that contributed material is impressive. Because of its brevity combined with the broad scope, however, we see only snapshots of events, short stories that merely catalogue many of the memorable moments that make up our recent disability history. There is no effort to analyze events in their context, to see our movement in relationship to changing political, social, and economic conditions.

The list of contributors or resources also reveal that the film was developed with little or no input from professional historians. References to relevant historical scholarship is entirely missing. However, professional historians are mostly to blame for this situation. As Ron Lofton says in the beginning of the film, there are few resources available under the topic of disability history in libraries - or in bookstores. Only recently have a few historians started paying attention to disability as topic that they should address, or as an analytical category on the same level as gender, class, race, and sexual orientation.

A Little History Worth Knowing is clearly a product that comes out of the disability community. It feels good that the narrator is a person with a disability. But, while the efforts of the people who produced *A Little History Worth Knowing* should be applauded, there are also some dangers for the disability movement related to such a product. Without in depth and rigorous historical scholarship, disability history as a field will remain a small and separate endeavor. Without professional historical work, disability history will perpetuate all the prevailing myths about disability issues. Historians rely on these myths because they have not taken seriously disability history as a field; they have not

examined the past through the lens of disability scholarship.

A few professional disability historians who understand disability as a social construction have started working to uncover the hidden history of disabled people. One such historian, Martha Edwards, has for example, done extensive research on disability in ancient Greece. She discovered that the commonly accepted story about a systematic infanticide of disabled infants during antiquity - as included in *A Little History Worth Knowing* - is probably a myth based on very few sources. We should not blindly repeat myths like this. We need to develop our history in such a way that it contributes to historical scholarship in general and becomes an integral part of "History."

One might make use of this film as a starter for discussions about disability history and the need for historical and cultural disability scholarship. Every budding disability historian should see it, as it demonstrates so clearly both the need for rigorous historical work and the growing desire within the disability community to learn more about our past and our role in everyone's past.